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Queer Times for the Straight Book: Maggie Nelson and Michel Serres

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08.15.19

If you read a lot of Michel Serres – and you might: he's written many books, about a lot of things – a conundrum emerges. On the one hand, he argues optimistically for the ways that humanists can traverse time. They can read books out of order and from different parts of the library. They can think of early studies in physics as resulting from later ones in philosophy, and they can break with gusto the rules of chronology and sequence. Since the beginning of his career, Serres has been warning against laminar models, which assume that particles move at equal rates, urging us to see time instead as a river, a fluid, in which different currents and movements are always at play: "Ophelia's boat goes upstream, here and there, Moses had a good chance of not dying at sea, the poetic waters of dreams know little of river transport and hydrodynamics. Everything does not go uniformly to death."¹ His case for the reversibility and multi-directionality of events in time pertains both to the way historical narratives are delivered and to the way good readers might re-inhabit the world.

And yet Serres, who studied science before he studied philosophy, also writes about the time that life of reading has cost him. In a 1997 series of published conversations with Bruno Latour, for example, he describes himself reading books and working his way through libraries with an acute consciousness of the hours this takes. Here and in *The Troubadour of Knowledge* (1991), Serres foregrounds the temporal dimension of book learning. He describes himself a little mournfully as having spent his youth accumulating the expertise that has allowed him to write as he does. "One only becomes a philosopher late in life," he explains, "because one must pass almost all of one's life in preparation."² Scientists, working more collectively and with a relative disregard for history, deploy the scholarly lifetime differently. A young Noble Prize-winner in science inherits without reproducing or even needing to understand the breakthroughs of the past. These "two inverse vectors of time and intelligence," represented by the sciences and the humanities, mean that the young scientist often shares the stage with "patriarchs" of literature, scholars who have had to retrace the steps of their elders in order to arrive at their own ideas.³ A "craftsman of writing," claims Serres, embarks on "a Sisyphean task so undefined that one spends one's life at it."⁴

Serres's insistence on the time that book learning takes is candid and relatively rare. In our field, despite the fact that reading makes up so much of the work we do, it's relatively

common to suggest that it happens off the clock, for our own pleasure. But Serres's more sober point about the way scholars in the humanities spend time is nevertheless difficult to reconcile with the vision he entertains of the reader having simultaneous and promiscuous access to knowledge from all periods. If reading of the kind associated most distinctly with the humanities — slow, cumulative, time consuming — registers usefully here, it does so in tension with the more creative ways of to-ing and fro-ing across pages and centuries that Serres champions. *Thumbelina*, Serres's recent encomium to a new generation of digital readers, can be read as an attempt to relax this tension. He imagines reading as a practice freed from linearity by digital access to texts. He compares the page unfavourably to the gridded city, the classroom, the furrowed field, its lines "almost as important to humans, or at least to Westerners, as the hexagon is to bees."⁵ Thankfully, he states, we are now leaving its format behind. "Thumbelina" is finally at liberty to drive her own paths through fields of knowledge, to participate in the creation of the texts she consumes, and to detach at will her electronically filled head from her motile body. Search engines and the banks of electronic texts that allow us to trawl become tools, freeing the reader from the restrictions of pagination and from the implied drag of having to read one word and one text before another makes sense. To his young avatar, Serres attributes an efficacy that supports the reconciliation of humanist knowledge acquisition with a more productive and flexible relationship to text. Digital text frees her from the predicament of having to choose between living and reading.

Thumbelina is a polemic, one that made the French bestseller lists in 2012. Perhaps because it was written in this popular register, Serres stays frustratingly sketchy about the digital styles of reading he celebrates. Does being able to jump from wiki page to blog post really constitute freedom from the reckoning of time? Don't compulsive online reading experiences actually exacerbate that very problem Serres has encountered in his own life, of reading, even the distracted kind, being an activity that must take and unfold unavoidably in hours spent with one book, one page, after another? *Thumbelina* doesn't seriously engage with these questions. But it does illuminate the way that print reading's linearity, the sequences and the dedication of time it requires, remains a real sticking point when it comes to Serres's other vision — of time as a river in which the humanist may swim in many directions. While his celebration of the possibilities of random access and digital interaction is difficult take literally, *Thumbelina* reflects the real problem that the consumption of books poses for those advocating new kinds of temporality.

It is Serres's view of time that has made him popular in literary and theoretical camps invested in the non-linearity, and particularly the queerness, of time: for nonchronological historicism and for narrative structures defying teleological and progressive movement. Carolyn Dinshaw, for instance, enlists Serres explicitly as an ally in *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (2014), lauding him for "fostering temporality other than the narrowly sequential." Dinshaw wants to tune into:

forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinary measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether — forms of being that I shall argue are queer by virtue of their particular engagements with time.⁶

She does this by presenting nineteenth and twentieth-century readers who stitch medieval moments and characters into their own experience of the present through their attachment to books. Their reading practices make them, in Dinshaw's account, charmingly tuned out of modern time. Fredrick Furnivall, one of her Victorian medievalists, divides his time between study and sailing, picnics, and rowing so equitably that that he takes twenty-two years to complete an edition he's working on.⁷

Serres's worry about the humanist reader's own time-use is sidelined but not resolved in this example. In Dinshaw's terms, readers like Furnivall inhabit time queerly because of their close relationship to the past, the way books become props supporting their backward-looking orientation to history, their irregular ways of life. But there is a temporal dimension that this celebration of queer reading doesn't really reckon with. By focusing on affluent, amateur readers who have the leisure to peruse and revisit medieval texts, Dinshaw ducks the challenge of having to account for the cumulative hours that their page turning takes. The minute we imagine someone like Furnivall as a professional,

the question of his readerly activity would show up differently. The pages he reads and writes would not only appear to take time, they would snap into focus as stubbornly accumulative in their own right. In this case, the *straightness* of his reading might begin to seem more obviously at odds with the logic of productivity and economic efficiency than the queerness of his interest in the medieval past.

This also raises the question that is the background to this essay: is the recalcitrant linearity of reading becoming more difficult to reconcile with capitalist modernity, with its demands for productivity, than the leapfrogging of the queer reader through time? In days where quick, live, and public media consumption promises to make reading something that might blur with life itself, are those stretches of time that reading traditionally interposes with life in fact becoming less normative? One can listen to an audiobook and drive; watch a play and hold a child; see the many panels of a fresco all at one glance. But the sustained reading of a text is a relatively exclusive kind of activity particular to scholars in the humanities. If time is the element we can swim sideways in as we read, it is also, as Serres suggests, the temporal dimension of what we do with texts that defines our work as different from that of those who make them, look at them, cut them up, or access them as data. Might the straightness of reading, then, make it a vital form of provocation?

I.

It is with these questions in mind that I move to another register and pick up my argument in relation to Maggie Nelson, a writer also known for her queer defiance of narrative linearity, while conscious, like Serres, of the demands of straight (or at least straight-forward) textual engagement. My case study is *The Argonauts*, a piece of life writing in which Nelson experiments fairly robustly with telling a story of romance and parenthood non-chronologically. Nelson has good political and personal reasons to try this. Hers is a queer and feminist household that she shares with her fluidly gendered partner, the video artist Harry Dodge. She believes that parenthood need not follow conventional timelines or have necessary consequences. Being born biologically female does not necessarily make one a woman, nor does giving birth represent the only beginning of parenting. On both fronts, it is important to Nelson that we question our reliance on linear trajectories, on the idea of certain effects following naturally from their conventional causes.

Practically, this means that *The Argonauts* is a lyric essay written without a clear narrative trajectory. Of course, the essay form has long supported baggy timelines and reverse chronologies: writers from Montaigne to Joan Didion and Geoff Dyer all know that stories don't need to be told or read straight and that the present time of reflection can loom large in a first-person narrative description of the past. But *The Argonauts* advertises its disavowals of plot more loudly than most lyric essays. Throughout this story, Nelson's son Iggy is gestating and has been born, a love is being worked out and has already arrived, and a gender transition is happening even as Harry is "not going anywhere." Nelson supports these paradoxes by telling events out of order and by ascribing circular geometries to arrangements that might otherwise seem progressive. "Babies," she claims "grow in a helix of hope and fear; gestating draws one into the spiral." ⁸ Giving birth in her account becomes a journey inwards, into a cave of pain, while her mother-in-law's dying, narrated by Harry, becomes a feisty tussle, a breaking through. Iggy's sickness as a baby, which Nelson dismisses as not being "precious or rich," not worth being places within this story, is presented instead as a "loop of time." ⁹

Like Nelson's earlier writing, *The Argonauts*, also uses shifts in tense to make the present of its story difficult to locate. In a single passage, she registers the receding of the past while reclaiming it as the narrative present:

On one of the long afternoons that has since bled into the one long afternoon of Iggy's infancy, I watch him pause on all fours at the threshold to our backyard, as he contemplates which scraggly oak leaf to scrunch towards first with dogged army crawl. ¹⁰

Nelson uses this intimate narrative present ("I watch him pause") to open up certain past scenes of her life with Harry, while recalling others, including Iggy's birth, and first setting up house with Harry and his son, in the simple past tense. Occasionally she makes the intimate gesture of opening up the present tense of her writing to those of us reading *The Argonauts*: "I labour grimly on these sentences." Though none of these techniques is extraordinary in itself, they contribute to the effect of the past, present, and future being more proximate and interchangeable here than biography or history generally allow. Representationally, *The Argonauts* makes a point of not being a straightforward recounting of the past.

The idea that points of contact exist between the past and the present, the living and the dead and the yet to come, has emerged as principle of queer theory in the last decade. Dinshaw, as we have seen, imagines history "to mean something that touches on past time, not necessarily a narrative, not necessarily a causal sequence."¹¹ She is in the company of scholars including Jack Halberstram, Heather Love, José Esteban Muñoz, Elizabeth Freeman, and Lee Edelman, have all whom have argued in various ways for intense forms of contact with the past and the future, and a refusal of traditional ways of locating ourselves in grand and local narratives about the lifetime. This scholarship informs Nelson's theoretical reflections as well as the way she's arranged the material pages of *The Argonauts*. Her luminously crafted paragraphs are generously justified and spaced out like beads that might be strung together differently. And the horizontal axis of her pages includes in sidebars the names of critics she is indebted to.

Her staging of the page as a plane of contact between writers of different generations has particularly pleased scholars on the lookout for evidence of Nelson's queer credentials.¹² While none of these ways of complicating timelines, or suggesting the proximity of the past to the present is unique to Nelson, her craft in this domain resonates with a general understanding that pages that shuttle us between the margins are queerer than strictly straightforward ones, and that a story given to us non-chronologically might encourage us to think differently of what it means to move through time. Harry's transition (he has top surgery and starts taking Testosterone during the years related in *The Argonauts*) and Nelson's pregnancy are both presented in this vein as provocations to think differently of the lifetime. Here, for instance, Nelson describes eating with Harry just after his surgery in the restaurant of their hotel:

You pass as a guy; I, as pregnant. Our waiter cheerfully tells us about his family, expresses delight in ours. On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more "male," mine more and more "female." But that's not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two humans undergoing transformations beside each other bearing loose witness. In other words, we were aging.¹³

This story of family life, Nelson suggests, does not follow the logic of futurity, development, and certainly not of the novel cascading toward a happy ending. Aging suggests a much looser way of being in time; one that might allow, for example, for Serres's "fluid waters of dreams" that carry us here and there.

One of the arguments against chronological thinking that Nelson flags most explicitly is Lee Edelman's 2004 *No Future*, an important critique of the way that conventional orientations towards the future have exploited the image of the child, the generation to come. This logic, Edelman argues, has pitted politically progressive visions of change against the realities of queer life. "The sequins of sequence," Edelman argues, "dazzle our vision by producing the constant illusion of consequence."¹⁴ Nelson refuses on this ground to cede her pregnancy to this kind of future:

On more than one occasion, a service member in the airport literally saluted me as I shuffled past. Their friendliness was nothing short of shocking. You are holding the future; one must be kind to the future (or at least a certain image of the future, which I apparently appeared able to deliver, and our military ready to defend). So this is the seduction of normalcy, I thought as I smiled back, compromised and radiant.¹⁵

By questioning that salute, Nelson puts herself on Edelman's side. Her pregnancy need not tilt towards the child to come — phenomenologically, she is attentive to its present and she remains actively resistant throughout the essay to Iggy as the imagined recipient of her writing.

II.

Nelson's theoretical commitments, narrative technique, and use of the page as an inclusive and multi-dimensional point of contact between past and present, seem on the side of reading as a criss-crossing of time. But is there a real alternative to reading texts straightforwardly on offer in *The Argonauts*? Certainly it's not the kind of online reading *Thumbelina* advocates: Nelson is a staunch critic of digital life. One might claim, perhaps, that Nelson's refusal of linearity helps her opens up queerer spaces (pages, domestic settings, futures already in reach). But at the level of content, spaces remain quite vague and minimally populated in this story of Nelson's life as writer, parent, lover. While we have some sense of where Nelson sleeps, and where she makes hot drinks, it's much harder here than in her earlier accounts of her unhappy romantic life to map her happiness spatially. Despite occasional mentions of tea with friends or lunchtime meetings, *The Argonauts* documents little traffic between Nelson's domestic space and the outside world. One of the few evenings beyond the house that she describes ends when she and Harry are denied entrance to a friend's trapeze-burlesque show because they have their baby with them. Another outing, to an art porn movie, happens in response to Harry's sense of isolation in LA. ¹⁶ When they are questioned about Harry's identity, it's while shopping for their Thanksgiving pumpkin. Living in a city traversed by highways and portioned out into residential plots, Nelson and Harry come across as securely moored to their red sofa, most occupied, in their lines of communication, with each other and their mothers. Nelson's space of writing, which she invokes just once — "I am writing this in public now" — is difficult to situate as happening anywhere but in a branch of a chain coffeeshop. ¹⁷

It's possible to read this relatively arid social landscape of *The Argonauts* more generously. But doing so involves returning to time — and to the ways that the time of reading and writing is actually accounted for by Nelson, even in a narrative that disavows other forms of sequence and progression in the name of queer politics. In this sense Nelson's project, like Serres's, is more revealing about the chronologies involved in reading and writing, than its explicit refusal of linear temporality suggests. For Nelson is as candid as Serres about the hours reading and writing cost her. In her 2007 *The Red Parts; A Memoir*, she describes herself explicitly having been holed up for long periods of time researching *Jane: A Murder* (2005). And across her work generally, the glimpses she gives of her practice as a student, a teacher and an author reveal the contours of a life divided between the time she spends with and away from texts — a life in which reading and writing, both parsed as costly and exclusive ways of spending time, are as important as spatial connections or living community.

In *The Argonauts* this comes across in one scene where we encounter Nelson and Harry discussing the story we are reading. We are only about a third of the way into the *Argonauts* at this point:

I finish a draft of this book and give it to Harry. He doesn't have to tell me that he's read it: when I come home from work, I can see the pile of ruffled pages sticking out of his knapsack, and I can feel his mood, which one might describe as quiet ire. ¹⁸

The next day, the two meet to edit the text over lunch. They make collective work of what Nelson more often describes as her solitary labor of coaxing sentences into being, editing them out of excess, "into boldness." ¹⁹ From now on we read the finished book in our hands as evidence of the editing that follows from that lunchtime dialogue — *The Argonauts* is given to us as a second or third draft of the manuscript that Nelson writes as a response to Harry's provocation that she's written about everything apart from this, "the queer part" of her life. ²⁰

Even in this scene of the first draft's first reception, it's clear how much timing, and time as a medium for productivity, matters. Nelson has been at work; Harry too, by the looks of his knapsack. They meet at home in the evening, but are forced by domestic routine to postpone editing until the next day, over lunch. Here and in other places, we get glimpses of reading and writing as part of a careful economy of hours. "I estimate that about nine-tenths of the words in this book were written 'free,' and the other one tenth, hooked up to a hospital-grade breast pump," writes Nelson of her own practice of composition. The making and consuming of text comes into focus as a matter of duration.²¹ We encounter the book as something for which time has to be made, and to which childfree time has had to be given over exclusively in costly chunks. Harry has not read the text at home, but at work, in a time and space quite separate from the one of queer domesticity Nelson celebrates. Contemplating Peter Sloterdijk's case for immersion in "blood, amniotic fluid, voice, sonic bubble and breath," Nelson insists pragmatically: "I feel no urge to extricate myself from this bubble. But here's the catch: I cannot hold my baby at the same time as I write."²² Any reading of the *Argonauts* spatially defined, for instance as an on-going conversation, or a portrait of life in queer company, competes here with its quality as a piece of writing that flaunts the fierce but intermittent rhythm of its creation and, by extension, its consumption as a book that must be read.

The sequencing that the intense reading of texts forces — you can't write and hold a baby (or read while attending a party, making love, building a house, teaching, or doing most kinds of political work) — also sets the tone for *The Argonaut's* broader biographical structure. For while Nelson refuses the before and after of life and death; the telos of courtship, reproduction, and gender transition, she draws very strongly on the logic of reading as something that comes before writing and on texts as things that must be written before they can be read. Her life as a graduate student forms, in this sense, the necessary prelude to *The Argonauts* because it was then that she did the reading that underpins the writing she is doing now. As those who have read Nelson's earlier work know, this earlier life was in many ways an edgier one, spur to her interests in violence and unhappiness — but it was also conducive to reading and writing in ways that her settled domesticity isn't.

In other contexts, paratexts such as Nelson's references to the authors she's read might be situated in what Jerome McGann calls a text's n-dimension, "the dimension that exposes the temporality function which is an inalienable feature of all the dimensions of the textual condition."²³ Footnotes signify the passage of a text in the world through time, the social dimension of reading that underlies and follows from its completion. But Nelson's more casual naming in her sidebars, and through italics, of the writers she thinks with refers here to reading she's done in the past. Her text's "temporality function" involves the years of study that she's banked against other experiences and forms of activity. The horizontal presence of her marginal citations might suggest, as Kaye Mitchell argues, a "vulnerability of borders/boundaries, an interpenetration of words and ideas, and a refusal of the assumed sovereignty of selfhood and authorship that becomes [*The Argonaut's*] strength (through conversation, communion)."²⁴ But these are references to the reading Nelson remembers, not to conversations she's currently in. The reservoir of virtual conversation upon which she now draws is not even physically present as a library: Nelson tells us that she writes away from her books, in coffee shops where the hours in which she might look up references are limited by the costs of childcare.

By the same logic, her writing offers itself up as temporally expansive — something that will take our time once the season for its reading arrives. The way that time that passes in *The Argonauts* is connected to the stages involved in publishing a text. A baby's growth, for instance, is measured alongside it: "Iggy's babyhood is already speeding away. By the time this book is published, it will be gone."²⁵ Harry's first son, a small child when he and Nelson meet, occupies the present as a youth lying on the sofa listening to music. Nelson is making us aware here of a lag that interferes in the idea of writing as a kind of communion, the page as an inclusive space. This is the time-lag that post-structuralism sees productively. The death, as Derrida puts it in "Envois," of us both is a prelude to the letter's coming into being as a fictional thing.²⁶ The autonomy of writing, upon which the whole poststructuralist project depends, derives from the time it takes for writing to reach a reader.

Nelson, who addresses large sections of *the Argonauts* to Harry in the second person deploys this temporal logic explicitly to draw a veil of privacy over her otherwise exposed life. Despite her deep investment in personal communication, she invokes the time that writing takes to explain why her text should be read less as a transcript of her own thoughts and more as a discourse true only to itself. The long unit of her text, and the lag involved in the publishing process, become protection against the kinds of immediacy associated with "instantaneous, non-calibrated digital self-revelation," which Nelson claims as one of her greatest nightmares.²⁷ In contrast, Nelson foregrounds the editing, the repetition, "the pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realization, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one's work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again."²⁸ It's all this textual work — the reading, followed by the writing, followed by the reading, the editing, the writing, reading — that make Nelson's fictional self into one she's comfortable sharing. But this is also what makes the evidence of time's passing in *the Argonauts* so rich, a text mired, in Derrida's terms, in the logic of absence that means writing is always too late.

III.

Despite resisting linearity at various registers, *The Argonauts* also continues to operate conspicuously, in the marketplace and in our own terms of praise, as a book to be read in time. It has been celebrated as a reading experience as intimate and pleasurable as they come, one that relies on an engaged and sympathetic uptake. It may qualify in some sense as a queer text, but in this sense it does not really do so at the level of its objecthood. It does not involve the vandalised covers, unbound pages, small press format, willingness to be read collectively or performatively, or to generate multi-media or e-texts that other radically non-linear texts have deployed. Compared, say, to the jazz poems of Langston Hughes or the library books whose covers artist Joe Orton rejigged, *the Argonauts* reads smoothly. As the author of compelling and intimate texts, Nelson understands reading as something that must compete for its turn; that cannot be done at a glance, or in conjunction with other activities, or through shortcuts, even when it is presented unconventionally on the page. Thus, while her narrative seems to celebrate the presence of a kind of erotic and domestic order, her life remains choreographed in time by the practical demands of the book. This involves the simple practicalities of the forward moving, the necessary patterning of the scholar's life, and the structure of before and after that her many years as a reader introduce to the writing time of *The Argonauts*. These bookish rhythms can be felt here as a linear alternation of various scales: between the kinds of human interaction affirmed and the forms of reading and scholarship that reflection on that action presumes. Like Serres at his most candid about what he really does each day, she makes a bid for the reader's time as something to be claimed through the conventions of plot and page turning, even as the forms of queer community she advertises as her own suggest a more collective and less linear way of being.

It is not my intention to suggest that texts are automatically less queer for being good to read — on the contrary, as I suggested at the outset, the furthest horizon of this paper is the claim that the straight time of writing and reading may be becoming, in a world of media detours and algorithms, a dimension of resistance and difference, and thus potentially of queerness, more powerful than we could previously have imagined. It's worth recalling Serres's wrestling, as a professional reader, to reconcile his theoretical excitement about the non-chronological with the unavoidably temporal axis along which the best time spent with books unfolds. It's not this aspect of his scholarship that's appealed to queer theorists until now. But there has been a reneging by queer theorists on the idea that linearity can be read automatically as negatively charged. Ben Davies and Jana Funke comment, for instance, that "linearity has become the straw man for a challenging, exciting and indeed necessary queer time."²⁹ Contributors to their collection, *Sex Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture*, go on to suggest that reproductive time may in fact be stranger than we thought (babies, after all, are pretty good at interrupting routines; affairs at creating alternative temporalities to straight lives), and to show that certain practices of new historiography may in fact have reintroduced their own kinds of linearity. Valerie Rohy, writing here, advocates an uncoupling of linear temporalities from ideas of the heteronormative and of queer life from anti-temporality, warning against

assuming too easily "that non-normative time will ally itself with perversion against the Law." ³⁰

But it's nevertheless worth registering why readers more sympathetic to *The Argonauts*'s queerness might object to the claim I've been making, I have suggested, for instance, that Nelson's disavowal of future-orientated thinking is in some ways undercut by the way her writing, and her investment in writing as a form of delay, involves its own kind of investment in her book's futurity. Her devotion to texts generally, and to this text in particular, as things that take time involves nothing if not the orientation towards the moment to come in which you and I will read it. The temporal structure of her narrative, which shows action being delayed and carried over to that moment after work, after the book is done, suggests that the reading of the book itself will put other activities on hold. At this register, Nelson participates more strongly in the logic of a deferral than her loose alliance with Edelman allows. ³¹ In writing her own letter, counting in poststructuralist terms on her death as author preceding the arrival of her words, Nelson invests in a logic of textual duration almost as traditional as the one of generational futurity she challenges.

To emphasise this element of timing in Nelson's text might be seen as calling her out for her palpable work ethic, presenting evidence that she participates fairly easily in the Protestant logic that many advocates of queer time have pitted themselves against. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman criticizes temporal regimes that advance the "use of time to organize individual bodies towards maximum productivity." ³² The alternative forms of embodiment, desire, and affiliation she advocates are similar in many ways to those Nelson celebrates. But for Freeman, time becomes a resource in this alternative project once it is "outside the capitalist and heterosexist economy," where it can be "described as the potential for a domain of non-work." ³³ Her case studies, perhaps tellingly, involve graphic artists and filmmakers, laborers whose work is more likely to happen and to be consumed off the clock than Nelson's. For similar reasons, Dinshaw opposes the nineteenth-century readers she describes in *How Soon is Now* to wage laborers: "amateur temporality starts and stops at will; tinkers and dabblers can linger at moments of pleasure when professionals must soldier duly onwards." ³⁴

Nelson, however, is fairly forthright about reading and writing as labor for which she is paid and activities with which other kinds of pleasure must be interleaved. And like Serres, she is invested in scholarship as work that can only fully be parsed as time-use: reading books took time, writing them takes even more. This work ethic, and her status as one of the very few who manage to earn her living successfully by reading and writing, commits Nelson to a syncopated beat, a sequential form of time-use that linear texts and texts read as lines prescribe. This linearity may be costly in terms of hours spent at a desk — years spent, in Serres's terms, in the library — but it's also becoming increasingly rare as lives take on that round-the-clock form that makes alternation between work and life, reading and writing, reading and living begin to seem old fashioned. Katherine Bond Stockton, addressing a queer community, singles syncopation out, in these terms, for praise:

Sure you read Bataille, teach Bersani, and luxuriate in Lee Edelman. But I think, like me, you're likely to be uber-Protestant-work-ethic-hounds at your labors six days a week with one day — one blessed day — for queer hedonism lived to the hilt. ³⁵

Stockton's essay goes on to argue for punctuation being the rhythm at the heart of queer practice. The alternation she argues for, between work and play, text and practice, is not so different from the one Serres advocates when he describes reading as supporting the ideal logic of there being a before and after:

Certainly one must go to the libraries, it is assuredly good to make oneself learned. Study, work, something will come of it. And after? For there to be an after, I mean some kind of future that goes beyond a copy, leave the library to run in the fresh air. ³⁶

These arguments make a case for the professionalism of the scholar as something queerer than Dinshaw and Freeman, with their celebration of the amateur reader and

marginal cultural producer, concede. But in order for this case to emerge, the temporal rather than the spatial practices of the even the queerest reader must be on show: the Protestant habits of Nelson or Stockton or Serres, visible as patterns that allow for great swathes of time when one is doing nothing more radical than reading, one page and one book after another.

This leads to a fairly simple point, one that Serres himself makes as he describes his decision to be a philosopher rather than a scientist: "[W]hen a person reads," he explains, "he writes very little. If one read everything, one would never write. Inversely, writing devours life, because it demands a crushing and monastic schedule."³⁷ Reading of the kinds we do as scholars of literature has always produced its own kind of duration; one that has to do in Derrida's terms with the mechanics of writing and its reception in the world. As Serres argues, this defines the particular profile of humanists who must read texts before combining them or abandoning them for new pastures — who must spend time with the books first, in order for there to be a new kind of after. There's something almost doleful about Serres's sense of the way this shapes his life story, as someone who has read and read, and then written and written. His fantasies of digital pathways cut through electronic archives at new angles are keener and more poignant than those of even the most ardent digital humanists — one feels the way in which his work as a reader and a writer has involved a never-ending wrestling with time.

But it's this wrestling with time, with reading as nothing if not a form of time-use that must be linear — even just at the level of there being one line after the other, one book before another — that characterizes his sense of what scholars in the humanities do differently from scientists. Nelson and Serres both understand this. Their fantasies of the non-linear, the non-chronological, the life lived between the lines and outside the boxes, are some of the most seductive around — but they are not nearly as inventive in the bigger historical picture as their work crafting texts that keep us reading, alternating in time between life and book, moving from one line to the next. Serres and Nelson both speak importantly to the hours reading takes, the straightness of the book as something that must be read, the before and after of book learning, and the ordering of the life in which reading must jostle for time with other kinds of political and romantic action. It is only by hearing what they have to say about this axis of time-use that we can do justice to the new and queerer forms of temporality that they advocate.

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2. Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 27. [↗]
3. Michel Serres, *Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser with William Paulsen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 55. [↗]
4. *Ibid.*, 91. [↗]
5. Michel Serres, *Thumbelina: The Culture and Technology of Millennials*, trans. Daniel Smith (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 22. [↗]
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7. *Ibid.*, 28. [↗]
8. Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015) 115. [↗]
9. *Ibid.*, 154 [↗]
10. *Ibid.*, 24–5 [↗]
11. Carolyn Dinshaw in "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Routable," ed. Beth Freedman, *GLQ* 13:2, (2007): 9. [↗]
12. Marcie Frank, for instance, faults *The Argonauts* for conventionality in other domains but approves Nelson's use of citationality; "Cooper's Queer Objects," *Angelaki* 23.1 (2018): 137. [↗]

13. Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 103. [↗]
14. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke, 2004), 35. [↗]
15. Nelson, *Argonauts* 112. [↗]
16. *Ibid.*, 83; 78. [↗]
17. *Ibid.*, 14. [↗]
18. *Ibid.*, 57. [↗]
19. *Ibid.*, 122. [↗]
20. *Ibid.*, 40. [↗]
21. *Ibid.*, 124. [↗]
22. *Ibid.*, 45. [↗]
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29. Ben Davies and Jana Funke, "Introduction: Sexual Temporalities" in *Sex, Gender, and Time in Fiction and Culture*, eds. Ben Davies and Jana Funke (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 10. [↗]
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31. One might read Nelson here as being in alliance with José Esteban Muñoz, whose *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* makes the best case against Edelman, one which depends in ways I've not done justice to here on the promise of the text itself. [↗]
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36. Serres, *Troubadour of Knowledge*, 58. [↗]
37. Latour and Serres, *Conversations*, 130. [↗]